Table Stakes. a sermon in response to Matthew 5:21-37 and Psalm 119:1-8, by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, February 16, 2020

Table Stakes. It’s what gets you a seat at the table – gets you into the game. Table Stakes is a poker term. Before the cards are ever dealt, before any bets are made, table stakes are what you’re willing to risk – it’s that stack of chips – the coins – the cash… whatever you lay down on the table, ready to put it into the pot at the right tactical moment – ready to use – to risk – ready to lose… on the chance of winning it all. +++ To start with, you really need to know what kind of game you’re getting involved with. If you show up thinking it’s just going to be a friendly game of nickel-ante poker and the everyone else is loaded for a $10 minimum bet – you aren’t going to last very long. +++ The term “Table Stakes” has made its way into other arenas now, as well. In the corporate world, you’d refer to the bare minimum that you have to do to compete as Table Stakes – for example, I used to train recent college graduates on the ins-and-outs of insurance underwriting – but we’d tell them that good customer service – returning phone calls – a friendly tone – those things are Table Stakes in the insurance business – if you can’t do that – you’re not even in the game. … It’s Table Stakes. +++ In football, it’s the basics of blocking and tackling. Everything else can be learned, they say, – but if your team can’t block and tackle – you’re not even in the game. +++ And, of course, there are Table Stakes for a healthy church, too: things like warmly welcoming guests, making children feel welcome and happy to be here, loving each other, and, of course, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ… If we can’t do those things, we’re not even in the game. It’s Table Stakes.

At the time of Jesus’ ministry, Jewish leaders had identified more than 600 … specific … commands in the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament. There were commands about personal purity, diet, how to interact with each other… commands about religious rituals, cleanliness, where and when to gather, what not to wear… and the list goes on. That was a lot to keep up with. But never fear, the Pharisees, scribes, and other religious leaders were there to remind you. Or, it’s more correct to say, they were there to enforce the Old Testament laws and commandments. Each one was just important as the last – all 600 commandments were… well, Table Stakes – all of them. Period! +++ You didn’t have to worry about why something was a rule – you just had to know it was… and obey it. It was so much to keep up with – so confusing – so overbearing. +++ There was no sense of freedom… no need for your own moral compass… no need to think for yourself. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago – the overarching message from the religious leaders was, “You aren’t good enough!” … “You don’t have it in you to make righteous choices on your own.” +++ When Jesus starts his ministry, at first glance it seems like he might have a more relaxed set of Table Stakes than the Pharisees. He doesn’t push all those laws quite as hard… Like when he cures a man with a withered hand, the Pharisees criticize Jesus for healing on the Sabbath – but he does it anyway!… Jesus defends his disciples after they pluck a bit of grain to eat on the Sabbath and then he accuses the Pharisees of “condemning the guiltless.” … He sticks up for them again when the Pharisees give Jesus a hard time because his disciples didn’t wash their hands before they ate. +++ So, you’ve got to wonder – does Jesus play fast and loose with the rules? … Does the freedom he give his followers mean he doesn’t care what we do? +++ Do we not need to bring as much to the table? +++ Or… is something else going on here?

To find our answer, let’s start by remembering what Jesus was talking about just before this – in the passage we read last week. Jesus… fulfills… the law and the prophets. +++ He doesn’t nullify them – he doesn’t replace them – he completes them. Remember, last week we talked about how Jesus’ life, ministry, and death was like playing out the Suspended Innings of a baseball game that had been suspended for weather – the game is finally fulfilled – completed – after stalling in the 6th inning for so long. +++ Here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wields his authority as the Son of God to call us to a higher level of righteousness than merely following a set of rules: – he proclaims that mercy, justice, and love… are the foundations of all moral action – everything has to be measured in those terms – even the Law. +++ Jesus obliges us to think for ourselves – to use our own moral compass that’s modeled after his example. +++ He fulfills the law with a higher standard – not a lower one. +++ NOW – looking to today’s reading, Jesus fleshes it out for us. He takes up examples of the original law and places them in a new context. In each case, he starts with what WAS said in ancient times – on Mt. Sinai – then tells his disciples what HE, now says about it – on this new mountain. +++ So, let’s make sure we really see what’s going on here – Jesus is not just contrasting his new words with tradition, or with the Pharisee’s interpretation. He’s contrasting his own words with those of the Torah itself (the law and the prophets) – he’s expanding the Torah. +++ Jesus isn’t just interpreting the Torah – or explaining it. +++ He’s claiming authority over it – he’s claiming authority **over these written words on a page,** – – – – and he completes them. ::; +++ || Here’s the formula Jesus uses to claim the authority over the Torah: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, … BUT I SAY to you. |||| “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ **But I say to you…** if you are angry with a brother or sister – if you insult them – if you call them ‘you fool’ you will judged harshly.” >> So… You must actively work for harmony – for kindness – for reconciliation. Don’t even bring your gifts to the church if you haven’t made peace with your siblings in Christ. That’s a higher standard. |||| “You have heard that it WAS said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ **But I say to you** that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in
his heart. 29If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away;... 30And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away...” >>> Jesus wants us to be driven by the desire to build up healthy relationships – not undermine them – and to inwardly reject our own inclinations to do otherwise. +++ Another higher standard. ||| “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely,’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all.” >>> If you can’t be trusted to answer truthfully without swearing, then you can’t be trusted at all. +++||| Jesus makes us all accountable for building up our community – for standing by one another – accountable for not dwelling on hurtful desires – being truthful – using ALL of our own strength, intellect, aspirations, and creativity to building up – not tearing down. +++ This Higher Righteousness that runs through Matthew – this call to righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees – exceeding the Law and the Prophets – exceeding Torah... This call to a Higher Righteousness builds through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and beyond – leading us finally to the question from a lawyer, trying to trap Jesus: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” +++ And Jesus answers “You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart,... and with ALL your soul,... and with ALL your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments,” Jesus says, “hang all the law and the prophets.” ||| +++ Suddenly, the Table Stakes required to play the Pharisee’s game don’t seem so steep anymore. 600 laws – that’s a lot to keep up with but at least it’s a finite number. +++ Jesus, on the other hand, is asking you to put it all on the table – everything you’ve got... All your heart... All your soul... All your mind. +++ And, using all of that, Christ calls on you to make your own moral decisions, in his name:: High stakes, indeed!!

We live in a time of moral relativism, a time when standing on true ethical principles seems quaint or naïve. Our sense of community in this nation has been systematically broken down by our leaders instead of built up – and most of us cheer from the sidelines as we watch them do it. All in the name of traditional Christian values, from both sides of the aisle. Individual leaders get so wrapped up in political parties they allow their own sense of justice to be dictated by expediency. Now there’s a growing movement to claim that my own religious freedom gives me the right to discriminate against fellow human beings who meet with MY disapproval. +++ And I’ve got to ask... +++ Is this the vision being laid out by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount? +++ “You have heard that it was said:; … … BUT *I* SAY to you.” +++ As a people – are we bringing the right Stakes to the Table – to even be in the game?

In 1938, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of a small group of church leaders who stood up to the Nazi regime – a regime that claimed for itself authority over the church. Here’s an excerpt from his 1938 confirmation sermon called “The Gift of Faith:” :: “You have only one master now... But with this 'yes' to God belongs just as clear a 'no.' Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustice, ... to all evil,... to all lies,... to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor,... to all ungodliness,... and to all mockery of what is holy. +++ Your 'yes' to God requires a 'no' to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God alone, even if that is your job,... your possessions,... your home,... or your honor in the world.+++ *** Belief... *** means... ***decision.” ++++++ Bonhoeffer died in 1945 at the Flossenbürg concentration camp, because he stood up for the authority of Jesus Christ over the church. ++++++ Table Stakes.

Psalm 119, whose opening verses are our Old Testament reading today, was composed by a poet whose deepest desire was to make God’s law the governing principle of his life. With 176 verses, it’s easily the longest of all the Psalms – but, despite its great length – it’s written in a way to help readers actually commit it to memory: It’s a series of 8-line stanzas, and each line of the stanza begins with the same letter – in order, through the Hebrew Alphabet: 8 lines beginning with Alef, then Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, etc. +++ What is so important about this long Psalm that would make people memorize it? I think the psalmist approached the law as Christ does: it’s not repressive; there’s freedom in it – there’s joy in it. “Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.” ... “I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances.” Those verses are worth memorizing.

Jesus Christ calls you – and trusts you – to come to the table ready to play. He calls you to build up your community – to stand by one another – to avoid hurtful desires – to value and honor the truth – to do justice – to love kindness – to love God – and to love your neighbor as yourself. +++ The Pharisees enforced obedience, and it was so overbearing, so abusive. Christ asks for more than obedience – has asks for your participation – your buy-in – your commitment. Jesus asks for so much more – but the GOOD NEWS is there is joy in serving him. Joy in knowing that when you fail – and you will fail – he forgives you. +++ Jesus Christ calls you to the table to play for the sake of his kingdom. Bring your Table Stakes: bring all you are – it is enough – YOU are enough. And, unlike a simple game where just one person walks away the winner – if you play your cards right – there will be no losers.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.